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School Libraries as the “Third Place”

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Abstract: American Sociologist Ray Oldenburg emphasized the importance of informal public gathering places as he named the “third place,” where people can enjoy good company and conversation. According to Oldenburg, The “third place” is necessary and important for the community and individuals because it encourages many social and personal benefits. Recently, many researchers of library science have paid great attention to the topic or the framework of “the library as place,” and some of them have deliberately tried to examine the role and significance of libraries as the “third place” for serving the communities. This paper investigates how successful school libraries may serve as the “third place” for students and faculties as well as how libraries support and enrich their school life holistically.

Keywords: School libraries, Third place, Ray Oldenburg, Robert D. Putnam, Social capital

1. Introduction: the library as place in the life of the user

Not long after the hot debates on “access vs. holdings,” or “Internet vs. building,” that swept American library society in the 1990s, a multi-media computer terminal “iPad” came onto the world market, and could potentially replace books and other printed materials. In this situation, the concept of “the library as place” has been widely stressed and keenly focused as the theoretical framework of a countermeasure against “digital libraries.” This concept also has the possibility to significantly suggest a new advanced perspective and philosophy to understand how and what the library could substantially contribute to its serving community and the people in our digital information society as social and cultural physical spaces.

Wayne A. Wiegand (2003) pointed out that “failure to include analysis of ‘library as place’ question” (p.372) in the LIS research agenda “prevents the LIS community from adequately understanding the social and cultural preconditions that frame the library’s present” (p.372). According to Wiegand, LIS research has focused on “information,” “learning,” and “education” from “self-centered” perspective, but “these narrowed perspectives have inevitably led the LIS community to think primarily about the user in the life of the library. To understand values the larger public assigns to the library, however, it might be more illuminating to focus on the library in the life of the user, especially in the areas of ‘place’...” (p.372). Furthermore, Wiegand emphasized that without pursuing research addressing place or space, “the LIS community will stand at a distinct disadvantage in its efforts to plan a future” (p.378). Therefore, “analyzing in-depth the community role of ‘the library as place’” (p.373) is crucial for the future of libraries.

Kawasaki (2009) also suggests that the research theme of “the library as place” will bring about splendid achievements in the attempts to ascertain how the library has contributed substantial practices and functions “in the life of the denizen,” and how the library should play its role “in the

life of the denizen” from now on. Furthermore, Kawasaki reviewed the major trends in the LIS researches on “the library as place” in the U.S., and especially stressed the concepts by Jürgen Harbermas, Robert D. Putnam and Ray Oldenburg in understanding of the history and the current situation of “the library as place.” To describe the school library as place, especially as the social activity space, Oldenburg’s notion of the “third place” and Putnam’s definition of “social capital” are considered to be useful and insightful.

2. Oldenburg’s Notion of the “Third Place”

2.1. The Definition of the “Third Place”

American Sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989) investigated the reality and importance of the informal public gathering place, where individuals can encounter different individuals, relax and enjoy each other’s company. According to Oldenburg, urban residents need three places to live a healthy public and private life: “home,” “work setting,” and “the core settings of informal public life or the community hangout”. In his book *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, he illustrated some examples such as the English pub and the French café, and described the role of the “third place” in the community. Therefore, the “third place” is necessary and important for the community as well as individuals, because it supports vibrant daily lives of residents in enhancing their high spirits, maintaining safe, order and social ties in community as well as furnishing many social and personal benefits.

Oldenburg’s notion of the “third place” produced world-wide interpretations and the model is being applied in wide range of contexts such as urban planning, retail markets, food and drink services (e.g. Starbucks Coffee), urban and sociological studies. Presently, the notion of the “third place” may be as influential and inspiring as *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacobs was in the 1960’s U.S., in which Oldenburg most found his “kindred spirit.” Jacobs, who was American-born Canadian writer and journalist, criticized the urban renewal policies of the 1950’s in the U.S., and appraised some modern metropolises where traditional strong community bond were still alive. In her book, she exemplified how the safety, order and a lively atmosphere were maintained in these cities, and criticized the new suburban residential areas, where people were living in loneliness, isolation, and lack of community. As for a community building and supporting system, Jacobs noted the significant function of “street (corners),” and Oldenburg found the importance of “third place”, both of which could successfully provide informal public meeting places in daily lives of the neighborhood.

2.2. The Characteristics of the “Third Place”

Oldenburg (1989) conceptualized the nature of the “third place” by organizing eight characteristics to be successful and attract people. Karen Fisher, et al. (2006) ¹⁾ summarized it and described third places as follows:

1. Occur on neutral ground where “individuals may come and go as they please, in which none are required to play host, and in which all feel at home and comfortable”

- (Oldenburg *Great Good*, p.2);
2. Be levelers, inclusive places that are “accessible to the general public and does not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion” and thus promote the expansion of social networks where people interact with others who do not comprise their nearest and dearest (p.24);
 3. Have conversation as the main activity—as Oldenburg explains, “nothing more clearly indicates a third place than the talk is good; that it is lively, scintillating, colorful, and engaging”(p.26); moreover, “it is more spirited than elsewhere, less inhibited and more eagerly pursued” (p.29);
 4. Are accessible and accommodating: the best third places are those to which one may go alone at most anytime and be assured of finding an acquaintance (p.32);
 5. Have “regulars” or “fellow customers,” as it is these, not the “seating capacity, variety of beverages served, availability of parking, prices, or other features, “that draw people in—“who feel at home in a place and set the tone of conviviality” while nurturing trust with newcomers (p.33-5);
 6. Keep a low profile as a physical structure, “typically plain,” unimpressive looking form the outside, which “serves to discourage pretension among those [who] gather there” and meld into its customer’s daily routine (p.37);
 7. Have a persistent playful, playground sort of mood: “those who would keep a conversation serious for more than a minute are almost certainly doomed to failure. Every topic and speaker is a potential trapeze for the exercise and display of wit” (p.37);
 8. Are a home away from home, the places where people can likely be found when not at home or at work, “through a radically different kind of setting from home, the third place is remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that it extends” (p.42).

In this book and another book *Celebrating the Third Place*, Oldenburg did not consider libraries. As Kawasaki (2009) noted, Oldenburg might believe that conversation, which is one of the key criteria of the “third place,” is not the central activity of the library.

2.3. The Personal Benefits of the “Third Place”

According to Oldenburg (1989), “precious and unique benefits accrue to those who regularly attend third places”(p.43), and these personal benefits include novelty, perspective, spiritual tonic, and friendship. The “third place” promotes novelty or mutual stimulation through richness of human contact in its diverse population, and new and wide topics of conversation; nurture healthy outlook by the humor, laughter, warm acceptance and fraternal bond; raise participant’s spirits in the upbeat mood of joy, vivacity and relief; provide a generous number of active friendship which is less demanding in “the routine, daily steadiness of the friendly association”(p.64). Participants can, through having fun with these benefits, put out any concerns of home and work from their minds and achieve “joys and blessings of being alive” (p.65) in the therapeutic setting. Meanwhile, the sociable and conversational skills, civic virtue, reciprocity, democratic mind, self-confidence and sense of belongings are expected to be fully developed. Besides personal-usage benefits,

office-usage advantages of the “third place” should not be disregarded. Maybe Users do not have to make meeting arrangements with people for appointments but could sometimes retrieve more useful and authentic information from the “third place” than staying at their offices

2.4. The Social Benefits of the “Third Place”

As for the social benefits of the “third place,” Oldenburg (1989) indicated the political role (promoting grass-roots political involvement and assimilation; providing a political forum, a staging area and “public character”), the habit of association (nurturing community affiliation and association), an agency of control and a force for good, fun with the lid kept on (enlivening recreational spirit), and outposts on the public domain (securing the public domain for decent use).”

Moreover, Oldenburg (1997) noted in the preface to the second edition of this book that “among the noblest of third place functions, rarely realized anywhere anymore, is that of bringing youth and adults together in relaxed enjoyment” (p.xix). The “third place” provides a good chance for understanding a school library as having significant function of bringing students (youth) and school library staff, teachers and volunteers (adults) together in relaxed enjoyment, which is rarely realized.

Also Oldenburg (1997) has noted, “the first and most important function of third place is that of uniting the neighborhood” (p. xvii), that is, building a strong and sustainable community. It is possible to say in other words that the “third place” may develop social capital as a consequence of many personal and social benefits. Karen E. Fisher et al. (2006) stated that “in many ways, Oldenburg’s work suggests that the third places build social capital”(p.138). This is the reason why the theory of the “third place” has recently been focused on and popular in the LIS research on the library as place. It is especially significant for the library to function as the “third place” in the community, because, if so, the library can be expected to, and supposed to develop social capital and traditional strong and sustainable community, and realize many personal and social benefits.

3. Putnam’s “Social Capital”

3.1. The Definition of “Social Capital”

American political scientist Robert D. Putnam published his most well-known book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* in 2000 where he explicitly discussed various statistical data and specific examples as the evidence that social capital has been declining in the U.S. since the 1970s. According to Putnam, “social capital refers to connections among individuals — social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p.5-6). Putnam proposed two forms of social capital: *bridging* (or inclusive) and *bonding* (or exclusive). The bridging social capital is “outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages” (p.11), whereas bonding social capital is “inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups” (p.10). Eventually, he stated that it should be an urgent and vital task for American society to develop social capital. Because, public institutions, economy and democracy could never function well, and civic health as well as

personal health and individual happiness could never be realized, without the accumulation of social capital.

3.2. Putnam’s Study on the Library

In 2003, Putnam with Feldstein published *Better Together*, which presented twelve case studies of “social-capital success stories.” In his case study of Near North Branch library of the Chicago Public Library, Putnam affirmed that libraries could “give people the ability to meet face-to-face or to connect with others in the community merely by being there” (p.49-50), and recognized public libraries as functioning well in building strong communities and creating social capital—both bridging and bonding. At Near North Branch Library, they succeeded in creating a social network among residents of two neighborhoods who had almost no contact because of wealth disparity. Their practices were as follows: encouraging volunteer activities such as Homework Help program, organizing community activities such as book discussions, and providing a series of workshops such as “One Book, One Chicago.” These practices are aiming at reaching out to all the local schools; offering equal and friendly services; providing a safe and comfortable space; having a particular focus on local history and culture as well as bridging the digital divide between the privileged and the unprivileged. Introducing the concept of the “third place” into his discussion, Putnam concluded, “although Oldenburg does not include it in his catalogue of third places, the branch library shares many third-place characteristics” (p.50). Putnam clearly illustrated that libraries could be the “third place” and have the ability to create social capital in the host community.

4. Field work

4.1. Ikuno High School Library (IHSL)

Ikuno High School was founded by Osaka Prefecture in 1920. The student enrollment number is about 1,000 and many of them go to leading universities in western Japan. Promoting the use of school library is one of the school educational goals. The school library’s collection is 47,000 books and periodicals. The total student circulation was 7,800 and the circulation per student was 7.8 in the 2008 school year. There is one part-time school librarian in charge of library routine work and four teachers who are in charge of library management. The features of this school library are the existence of Library Planning Committee (LPC) of students; a development of Fujiwara System, the original library collection software by Mr. Fujiwara, who is a former LPC member graduate.

4.2. Library Planning Committee (LPC)

LPC is a genuine volunteer group, which is currently composed of the 17 students who love the library. They usually enjoy frequent usage of the library such as using it for reading, chatting, studying, searching for information in the library and are willing to help the users and assist the librarian at any time. They regularly conduct such activities as follows:

- To make a brochure about recommended books for the school festival.

- To select a special topic for each month and each specific occasion, and display the relevant books and materials on the special corner.
- Library PR activities such as making posters, flyers, newsletters and homepage
- Assistance in the library material selection
- To guide high-school students and parents in the library at Open School.
- PR activities for Art and Entertainment Appreciation Day (providing information about the performance, and artists or players; making interviews with them; writing and publishing a report)
- To take an inventory with library staff
- To make a seasonal decoration in the library with library staff

4.3. Methodology

This continuous study involves observing and interviewing users of the library and was initiated in March 2010. All the LPC members as well as some graduate former members were interviewed. And later on, non-user students will be interviewed as well. As of May 2010, three graduates, four members, a librarian and a teacher librarian were interviewed in-depth. The basic questions that constituted the interview are listed below:

- ① Why did you become a LPC member?
- ② How can you find the differences between LPC and the extracurricular activities?
- ③ How can you find the differences between LPC and official school committee's library section?
- ④ How can you find the differences between the school library and internet café /game center?
- ⑤ Did LPC contribute to extend your human network?
- ⑥ What was the most interesting activity of LPC for you?
- ⑦ What kind of place is this school library in your school life? What kind of words would you use to describe this school library?
- ⑧ What did you learn or acquire thanks to your participation in LPC? What did you learn or acquire thanks to your attendance in this school library?

5. Results and Discussion

Although the study of Fisher et al. (2006) show that Seattle Public Library “fully meets few of Oldenburg’s criteria,” the data on Ikuno High School Library supports the following seven criteria:

1. *Occur on neutral ground where “individuals may come and go as they please, in which none are required to play host, and in which all feel at home and comfortable”*

The school library is definitely a neutral ground in the school community. There exist no prejudice, no bias, but neutral perspectives in dealing with the students and collections. In the school community, it is only the school library that students “may come and go as they please,” and are welcomed even just in order to spend time by themselves or with friends at any time. In the interviews, all the LIS members

frequently referred to such expressions as "when in the library, I feel comfortable," "I can relax," "I feel at home," "I'm happy," "I feel calm," although sometimes they willingly "host" or help the user students.

2. *Be levelers, inclusive places that are "accessible to the general public and does not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion" and thus promote the expansion of social networks where people interact with others who do not comprise their nearest and dearest;*

The school library is a grand leveler, accessible to all students, faculty and all others in the school community. Every student is "enjoined, accepted, embraced and enjoyed" as equal. According to the interviews, the social network of LIS members is actually expanded to a great extent. For example, Mr. Fujiwara, a graduate and the former LIS member, the creator of Fujiwara system, said as follows:

Thanks to becoming a LIS member, I was able to meet a lot of people whom I could never meet otherwise, and I made a variety of friends and acquaintances.

Moreover, friendships could involve the teacher. Another LIS member mentioned the following:

I wonder why I felt more sense of intimacy with my teacher when we were in the library. I was able to talk about anything that I might hesitate to say in the classroom or the faculty room. I really enjoyed talking a lot with my teacher in the library.

This student graduated 4 years ago, but still occasionally visits her teacher at the school library.

3. *Have conversation as the main activity—as Oldenburg explains, "nothing more clearly indicates a third place than the talk is good; that it is lively, scintillating, colorful, and engaging"; moreover, "it is more spirited than elsewhere, less inhibited and more eagerly pursued";*

As noted above, the main activities of LIS are planning and carrying out the projects. Therefore, they definitely need the lively conversation so as to promote their discussions, communications and interactions.

In the extracurricular activities such as Art club and Manga club, basically they do something individually and make their own work, but on the other hand, in LIS we usually have so much discussion, and often do something altogether, talking things over.

According to the interviews, LIS members consider themselves as more "enthusiastic," "motivated," "interested," and "spirited" than those of official School Committee and some clubs. This is partly because they are willingly and voluntarily working on their own initiative and interest with the generous support of the library staff.

4. *Are accessible and accommodating: the best third places are those to which one may go alone at most anytime and be assured of finding an acquaintance;*

The school library is, LIS members noted, “easy to approach,” “conveniently located” and “quickly accessible” for them spending most of the day at school. Every student may go there feeling relaxed at any time and enjoy a good time by reading books. All the LIS members indicated in the interviews that they are always “assured of finding an acquaintance” or a friend in the library all the time.

5. *Have “regulars” or “fellow customers,” as it is these, not the “seating capacity, variety of beverages served, availability of parking, prices, or other features, “that draw people in—“who feel at home in a place and set the tone of conviviality” while nurturing trust with newcomers;*

The LIS originated from library “regulars.” There are many “regulars,” in addition to LIS members, in the library. Through the observation and interviews, it became evident that LIS members are always open-minded and friendly to every user including newcomers, and keeping the library in a warm and cheerful atmosphere. A graduate, who was a former LIS member, stated:

I’m not good at making friends, but in the library, I quickly made friends and acquaintances. The people in the library, including seniors, were very friendly, so they casually addressed me in an informal manner, a new visitor and a perfect stranger. Then I automatically became a LIS member.

6. *Keep a low profile as a physical structure, “typically plain,” unimpressive looking form the outside, which “serves to discourage pretension among those [who] gather there” and meld into its customer’s daily routine;*

This school library is as old and plain as all other classrooms, but cleaner, brighter and more spacious. The furniture and low shelves, which are made of wood, give a settled and comfortable atmosphere inside. The school library becomes a part of students’ daily school routine.

8. *Are a home away from home, the places where people can be likely found when not at home or at work, “through a radically different kind of setting from home, the third place is remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that it extends”.*

In responding to the question⑦: “What kind of place is this school library in your school life? What kind of words would you use to describe this school library?,” almost all the LIS members replied using expressions as follows:

- home
- the second home
- like home
- home is the first, the library is the second

- no difference between home and the school library
- my own home

6. Conclusion

My analysis of the IHSL supports “third place” concept elaborated on above, while that of the SPL by Fisher and et al. (2006) does not support it. The school library might have more opportunities than public libraries in becoming the third place for student users partly because the school library has a “smaller scale and tighter cohesiveness” as suggest by Fisher and et al. (2006). The analysis of the present study also supports Putnam and Feldstein (2003) that libraries develop social capital by “facilitating human relationships via trust and understanding and hence nurture community” (Fisher p.153). It is significant that like the SPL and the Chicago Public Library’s Near North Branch Library, the IHSL also develops both bonding and bridging social capital. The IHSL establishes the LIS, a homogeneous group, which is comprised of the students of similar interest, and at the same time, also promotes the LIS members to meet and interact with other students and diverse members of the community.

Notes

- 1) Fisher et al. conducted 226 interviews regarding people’s perceptions of the SPL as a physical, social and informational space. The conceptual framework of the study was based on the notion of “third place” by Oldenburg and the definition of place by Creswell. The analysis indicated that SPL fully met only three criteria of the “third place.” However, the same analysis significantly indicates that SPL offers many personal and social benefits as Oldenburg noted, and is also supported by Putnam and Feldstein’s study.

There are several other studies trying to verify the library’s conformance with the “third place” as follows:

Other major studies on the public/academic library as place referring to the “third place” are:

- Arenson, Adam (2006) “Libraries in Public before the Age of Public Libraries,” *The Library as Place: History, Community and Culture*, Bushman, John E. and Gloria J. Leckie, eds.
- Harris, Kevin (2003) “Your third place or mine? Public libraries and local communities,” *Public Library Journal*, 18 (2), p.26-29.
- Lawson, Karen (2004) “Libraries in the USA as traditional and virtual ‘third place’,” *New Library World*, 105 (1198/1199), p.125-130.
- Leckie, Gloria J., and Jeffrey Hopkins (2002) “The Public Place of Central Libraries: Findings from Toronto and Vancouver,” *Library Quarterly*, 72 (3), p.326-372
- McKenzie, Pamela J. et al. (2006) “Behind the Program-Room Door: The Creation of Parochial and Private Women’s Realms in a Canadian Public Library,” *The Library as Place: History, Community and Culture*, Bushman, John E. and Gloria J. Leckie, eds. (2006), Westport, Connecticut, Libraries Unlimited.

- Waxman, Lisa et al. (2007) "The library as place: Providing students with opportunities for socialization, relaxation, and restoration," *New Library World*, 108 (9-10), p.424-434.

The studies related to the school library as place referring to the "third place" are:

- Brehm-Heeger, Paula (2006) "A Tie for Third Place; Teens need physical spaces as well as virtual places," *School Library Journal*, 7/1/2006, p.27.
- Estill, Adriana (2006) "Going to Hell: Placing the Library in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," *The Library as Place: History, Community and Culture*, Bushman, John E. and Gloria J. Leckie, eds. (2006), Westport, Connecticut, Libraries Unlimited.

The following studies do not deal with the "third place," but studying the school library as social place.

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- Rafste, Elisabeth Tallaksen (2005) "A Place to Learn or a Place for Leisure? Student's Use of the School Library in Norway," *School Libraries Worldwide*, 11 (1), p.1-16.

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- 2) Jacobs, Jane (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Random House Inc.,
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- 5) Oldenburg, Ray (2001) *Celebrating the Third Place: Inspiring Stories About the "Great Good Places" at the Heart of Our Communities*, New York, Marlowe.
- 6) Putnam, Robert D. (2000) *Bowling Alone: Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York, Simon & Schuster.
- 7) Putnam, Robert D., and Lewis M. Feldstein (2003) *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*, Simon & Schuster.
- 8) Wiegand, Wayne A. (2003) "To Reposition a Research Agenda: What American Studies Can Teach the LIS Community about the Library in the Life of the User," *Library Quarterly*, 73 (4), p.369-382
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